

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUEBEC 0103

EO 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, CA
SUBJ: O'NEILL ALL SMILES AT FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL COMMUNICATIONS
MINISTERS CONFERENCE

1. PERFORMANCE OF USUALLY HARD-LINING LOUIS O'NEILL AT
THE RECENT COMMUNICATIONS MINISTERS MEETING IN CHARLOTTETOWN,
P.E.I. SEEMS ANOTHER INDICATION THAT THE GOQ HAS DECIDED
THEIR ELECTORAL PROSPECTS ARE BETTER SERVED BY PROJECTING AN
IMAGE OF COOPERATION WITH FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL COLLEAGUES
IN FINDING SOLUTIONS TO COMMON PROBLEMS, RATHER THAN BY
ANGRY EXITS AIMED AT MAKING OBSCURE POLITICAL POINTS. IN TIME
OF ECONOMIC CRISIS VOTERS ARE NOT BEING TOLERANT OF FAMILIAR
WINDMILL-TILTING.

2. IN UNACCUSTOMED ATTEMPT AT STATESMANSHIP O'NEILL PROPOSED
PLAN FOR DEVOLVING FEDERAL POWERS IN COMMUNICATIONS FIELD
FOLLOWING SCHEME HE DUBBED THE "SAINT-LAURENT FORMULA".
O'NEILL WAS REFERRING TO A FORMULA DEvised BY FORMER PM LOUIS
SAINT-LAURENT IN 1953 INVOLVING DEVOLUTION OF CERTAIN FEDERAL
REGULATORY POWERS TO THE PROVINCES (IN THAT PARTICULAR
INSTANCE THE ISSUE WAS TRANSPORTATION). IF WE UNDERSTAND THE
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PRINCIPAL CORRECTLY, O'NEILL'S PROPOSAL WOULD MEAN THAT LICENSING
POWERS IN THE FIELD OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS WOULD BE
DELEGATED TO PROVINCIAL AGENCIES; HOWEVER, FEDERAL ORGANIZA-
TIONS SUCH AS CBC-RADIO AND RADIO-CANADA WOULD BE EXEMPT FROM
PROVINCIAL CONTROL.

3. MORE IMPORTANT THAT THE SUBSTANCE OF O'NEILL'S PROPOSAL,

WHICH SEEMS LIKELY TO BE TURNED DOWN, IS THE CONCILIATORY ATMOSPHERE IN WHICH THE MEEITN WAS CONDUCTED, PARTICULARLY CONSIDERING THAT O'NEILL IS ONE OF THE GOQ'S TOUCHIEST MINISTERS. THERE APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN NO CONFRONTATION IN CHARLOTTETOWN, JUDGING BY PRESS REPORTS, IN MARKED CONTRAST TO RENE LEVESQUE'S WALK-OUT AT THE ECONOMIC SUMMIT LAST FEBRUARY. REACTION IN QUEBEC TO THAT DISPLAY OF PIQUE WAS NOT FAVORABLE, AND A DECISION APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN MADE HERE TO AVOID A REPETITION. O'NEILL EMPHASIZED THAT HE WAS TRYING TO REACH A SOLUTION ACCEPTABLE TO ALL PARTIES, THAT "SHARING POWER IS THE VERY SPIRIT OF FEDERALISM" AND THAT HIS PROPOSAL INVOLVES "A KIND OF REPLACEMENT OF AUTHORITY BY DELEGATION," THE KIND OF ACTION THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT CAN TAKE "WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF THE CURRENT CONSTITUTION." (AS MICHEL ROY POINTED OUT EDITORIALY IN LE DEVOIR TODAY, THERE WAS REALLY NOTHING PARTICULARLY NEW ABOUT O'NEILL'S PROPOSAL. A SIMILAR SUGGESTION WAS MADE BY BOURASSA MINISTER JEAN-PAUL L'ALLIER SOME YEARS AGO.) O'NEILL EVEN DESCRIBED THE CONFERENCE AS A "GOOD MEETING", DESPITE THE LACK OF A CONSENSUS.

4. COMMENT: WE HAVE THE DISTINCT IMPRESSION, UPON WHICH WE WILL BE COMMENTING MORE FULLY BY SEPTTEL, THAT THE PQ GOVERNMENT, BESET BY ECONOMIC WOES AND DECLINING POPULARITY, IS PULLING IN ITS HORNS. THE CURRENT NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SESSION HAS BEEN CONCERNED ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY WITH THE ASBESTOS ISSUE; THERE HAS BEEN A COMPLETE ABSENCE OF ANY NEW SOCIAL INITIATIVES;
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CAMILLE LAURIN'S CULTURAL WHITE PAPER HAS YET TO SURFACE; A CONTROVERSIAL PROPOSAL FOR REFORM OF MUNICIPAL FINANCES HAS BEEN RETURNED TO THE BACK BURNER; LEVESQUE'S INAUGURAL SPEECH TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY WAS EXCEPTIONALLY LOW-KEY; AND PARIZEAU WILL TABLE ANOTHER CONSERVATIVE BUDGET COUPLED IN ALL PROBABILITY WITH A TAX CUT. O'NEILL'S AMIABLE PERFORMANCE IN CHARLOTTETOWN IS ANOTHER STRAW IN THE WIND COMPARABLE IN ITS WAY WITH THE RECENT SIGNING OF A QUEBEC-OTTAWA AGREEMENT ON IMMIGRATION.
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